

**Interview: Dr. Saad al-Faqih**Head of the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia
(MIRA)

Saad al-Faqih was a professor of surgery at King Saud University until March 1994. He was jailed for his heavy involvement in the country's reform movement. Upon his release from prison, he became director of the London office of the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), then the leading Saudi opposition group. He left CDLR to form MIRA in 1996. The interview was conducted by Mahan Abedin at Dr. Faqih's private residence in North-Central London.

Abedin is an analyst of Middle East politics, educated at the [London School of Economics and Political Science](#).



Saad al-Faqih

You frequently state that Saudi Arabia is facing a dire crisis. What do you mean by this? What are the roots of this crisis?

The regime is facing several major challenges that it is incapable of dealing with. The challenge of violence has already started and is increasing. Once it shifts towards the royals, rather than Westerners, the collapse will be imminent. In addition, there are mounting socio-economic problems: increasing poverty, unemployment, domestic crime, social disintegration and sky-high national debt. In the background, there is the crumbling of the regime's Islamic legitimacy since the 1991 Gulf War, which has significantly weakened its foundations.

To make matters worse, the regime does not have the proper command system to deal with these crises. There is neither a central, powerful figure in the royal family [to impose his will] nor a collective decision-making mechanism, so the regime is not capable of surmounting these challenges. The dispute within the royal family about succession is kept artificially hidden by the living body of the king. Once King Fahd dies, the dispute will flare up.

How did the Gulf War precipitate the breakdown of the regime's religious legitimacy?

Since the time of King Abdulaziz, the regime has understood that it cannot, on its own, convince the public that it is a legitimate government - legitimacy had to be conferred by the *ulama* [clerics]. Abdulaziz wanted people to obey him as the representative of God's will. It is well known in Islamic discourse that when the ruler is implementing Islam, he should be obeyed. Abdulaziz was not implementing Islam in the proper political sense, but he knew that he could convince the people by securing the loyalty of the *ulama*. Abdulaziz's successors followed the same principle and hence were very tolerant towards the *ulama*, even though their own behavior and the way they have run the country is un-Islamic.

During the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis, the official *ulama* sanctioned the entry of 500,000 non-Muslim forces into the kingdom a decision that led dissident clerics to challenge the regime after the war. Many were arrested or silenced during the nineties. After 9/11, the regime provided the Americans with air bases to attack the Taliban, creating further strains. Sheikh Hamoud bin Oqla al-Shuaibi, a respected independent cleric, challenged the regime and said that its support for America deprived it of Islamic legitimacy. The support provided by the regime to the Americans in the current war on Iraq was the straw that broke the camel's back. Interestingly, the official *ulama* remained as loyal to the regime as ever, to the degree that they appeared as mere officers implementing instructions. That destroyed their credibility and hence their ability to provide legitimacy to the regime.

What kind of Islamic ideology does MIRA promote? Are you a Wahhabi organization?

I do not like to use this description. I would describe myself as a Muslim. I derive my teachings straight from the Quran and Sunna - understanding them through the original interpretations without deviation. In terms of implementation, however, I believe very much in practicality and flexibility.

How does your interpretation of Islam differ from that of the Saudi religious establishment?

The official *ulama* preach that Islam means absolute obedience to the leader. There is no room for accountability, transparency, or freedoms. This is the way they sell Islam. We say Islam is power sharing, accountability, transparency, and freedom of expression. This is the main difference. Their interpretation is always what the regime wants.

What about women's rights?

This is a very intricate issue in Saudi Arabia. The problem is that there is a mixture between social habits and real Islamic teachings. It is very difficult to underline the differences between the two.

Should women have the right to drive?

Again social habits dictate this. In Islam there is no clear justification for denying these rights. In Islam only activities that are explicitly prohibited are *haram* [forbidden]. In MIRA, we want women to be active and many women take part in our radio shows and Internet service. But we are reluctant to explore this issue in detail until proper platforms for debate and discussion have been established in the country since it might backfire.

MIRA has called for a consultative council directly elected by the people and empowered to appoint the head of the executive branch. Are you essentially calling for the overthrow of the Saudi regime?

Well . . . to put it simply, I would say yes. We are demanding changes in the country and these change are simply incompatible with the survival of the regime. I don't expect the regime to bring about comprehensive reforms on its own. It cannot tolerate even minimal freedoms of expression and assembly. If these freedoms were allowed, people would demand an accounting of the many billions of dollars stolen by the royals and, if they were not stopped, they would then encircle the princes' palaces, demanding the return of these billions. People would demand that those behind the abuse of thousands of prisoners be prosecuted and, if not stopped, would attack the prisons or the Interior Ministry. The regime is instinctively aware of this and will not allow it to happen.

What is your strategy for engineering the regime's collapse?

We are working to inform, empower, and mobilize the people through radio and television broadcasts and other means of communication. The first test [of this strategy] came in October, when we succeeded in organizing an unprecedented demonstration in Riyadh. However, while we're working to change the regime ourselves if necessary, we anticipate that it will fall on its own from internal problems. And our role then would be to prevent the chaos rather than remove the regime.

How is it likely to fall?

The regime is very weak and divided. There is no central figure or collective decision-making mechanism. The four most powerful royals - Abdullah, Sultan, Nayef and Salman - rarely meet together. There is a deep rift in the royal family and the only thing preventing it from coming out into the open is the living body of King Fahd. Although the king is mentally incapacitated, his physical survival is actually protecting the royal family. Once Fahd dies, they will have to deal with two points of disagreement. The first is who will become the next crown prince. They have no problem with Abdullah becoming king, but there is division over who will be next in line. Abdullah does not want Sultan to become Crown Prince. Even if he initially appoints him as a crown prince to avoid turmoil, he will remove him later.

The second point of disagreement is how much authority Abdullah will exercise. Abdullah insists that he will have complete authority as king he will not accept power sharing within the royal family. The other three want him to have no more authority than what is has now.

So there will be a confrontation between the royals?

Yes, there is likely to be an armed confrontation between the different factions sooner or later. Abdullah may temporarily accept some form of settlement after his ascension, but when he gets more confident he will try to sideline people like Sultan and Nayef, who will then resist in a fierce manner.

The second problem, which is no less dangerous, is the challenge by al-Qaeda and other groups who believe in violence. Their target is not only America but the royals as well. If they go ahead with that the aura of the regime will disappear and the country will sink into chaos.

Saudi officials claim a 10 man terrorist cell that fought security forces in August at a rest stop north of Riyadh was linked to MIRA. Is this allegation true?

It is rubbish. The Saudi regime is unable to defeat us politically, so they resort to these lies, exploiting the current views in the West.

They want to smear you?

Of course. We are their public enemy number one. MIRA is probably more dangerous to them than al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda is still preoccupied with America, while we are dedicated only to fighting the Saudi regime.

Do you advocate violence against the regime?

We are totally dedicated to peaceful means and we think we can achieve change by that.

What points of disagreement do you have with Osama bin Laden?

I think bin Laden is more concerned with America and hence see no logic in the question itself.

You suffered a stabbing attack in June . . .

A kidnapping attempt.

You claimed that they were acting on behalf of Saudi intelligence.

The people who came were English, but apparently sponsored by the Saudis . . .

Did they come here to this house?

Yes, they came here. And their intention, judging from the way they conducted the fight, was clearly to kidnap me.

Were you alone in the house?

I was with my family.

You have no protection here, do you?

Well, now I have added some protection.

Isn't this place under surveillance by British security?

Now it is, but it wasn't before.

Why would they want to kidnap you?

To take me back home. Kidnapping is better than elimination . . .

It would give them a chance to interrogate you.

Yes. Also, they would paralyze all the potential leaders behind me who are still in the country. After torturing me they would arrest them and get rid of them. But if they eliminate me they will not be able to identify potential leaders.

How would they manage to kidnap you here in London and smuggle you out of the country?

They kidnapped a member of the royal family, Sultan bin Turki, from Geneva earlier this year. So it is not impossible.

You were once a leading figure in the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), headed by Muhammad al-Masari. Why did you break away from the committee and found MIRA in 1996?

Well, there are things that we have agreed not to speak about. So I will speak about the things that we can speak about, which have to do with policies and strategy.

When we came to Britain, our original mission consisted of 4 principles, which I felt Dr. Masari had later shifted from. The first principle was that CDLR should be focused on Saudi Arabia. It should not involve itself with any other country. The second was that CDLR should be a discreet and independent group. It would respect other groups and might even exchange ideas and experience, but it would not make an alliance or affiliate itself with any other group. The third principle was that decision-making in CDLR should be based on collective consultation. The fourth was we saw our role as ambassadors and messengers. We don't sell or promote ourselves as the future presidents or future leaders of the country. The real action is inside the country. We are only a media window or communications platform. And then came the straws that broke the camel's back. But these are the . . .

These are the things you do not want to discuss.

Yes.

Why did the British government want to deport Masari?

To please the Saudis. This is the same reason why I have not been *officially* given asylum.

But you are not pressured here. You can act freely.

Nobody can pressure you here in the UK. Even if you are a visitor for 6 months you can do anything in terms of media and press like any British citizen. The law protects you.

Have you ever felt under surveillance here?

Well, the Saudis are trying to convince the government here that we have links to terrorism.

Have they succeeded?

No. We are careful to remain within legal boundaries and recently they [the British] have discovered that betting on strategic relations with the [Saudi] regime is dangerous. It is better to have relations with the people and I assume they know how much public support we have.

One scholar recently wrote that Saudi opposition leaders are more interested in preserving the identity of their separate voices as critics of the regime than in undertaking coordinated action. Is that an accurate assessment?

If he means that we are not working with other opposition groups, then yes, he is correct. We are not very keen to work with other groups. We don't want to confront them either. We have a very clear and sensitive program and we want to control this program completely. It is in our interest currently to keep our program to ourselves. We want to see what is happening in the country. This idea of cooperation does not preoccupy us. But if he means that we are preoccupied with that, then he is wrong.

How extensive is your network inside Saudi Arabia?

We extend everywhere horizontally, but we are relatively weak vertically. We have huge numbers of followers inside the country, but we have to admit that the command and control network is not equivalent to the horizontal spread.

How are instructions transmitted to your followers in Saudi Arabia?

We use the mass media and communications technology to reach the followers and enable them to reach us.

How are these satellite broadcasts routed into the Kingdom?

We send the signal to a land station, which beams it to the satellite, which then beams it to a wide area, including Saudi Arabia.

How successful have the Saudis been in jamming these broadcasts?

They have had some success. It can be jammed by directing a jamming beam from anywhere in North Africa, Europe, the Middle East, eastern parts of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

How do they do this?

They identify the satellite, uplink the frequency (which is not coded) and then send a signal to the transponder using the same frequency as our uplink frequency. Since they are conscious of the illegality of this kind of jamming, they conceal the source of the jamming by using multiple sites.

What kind of relationship should Saudi Arabia have with the United States?

Like its relationship with other countries. There should be no special relationship. This domination and huge influence should stop.

Are you alarmed by growing US involvement in the region?

Obviously I loathe a US invasion of a Muslim country, but I think this invasion and all the troubles it has caused will help the American public better appreciate the shortcomings of the Bush administration.

By invading Iraq, has the US gained greater leverage to change the region for the better?

This is just not happening. The Americans are not pressuring the Saudi regime to change at all. All the pressure is either to cooperate in terms of security or to force a cultural change to remove what they believe are the foundations for terrorism

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